

She made her MARC

Henriette Avram died at 86 on April 22 in Miami. She was a systems analyst who created the method of transforming millions of Library of Congress catalog cards into a searchable electronic database. With the introduction of technology, librarianship became information science.

Known to librarians as MARC, for Machine Readable Cataloging, her system is now the worldwide standard. It was adopted in 1973, two years after it became the US standard. Her work forever changed the relationship of a library to its users, and the relationship of geography to information, making it possible to search the holdings of libraries thousands of miles away. Her work encoding and organising data for transmission also helped set the stage for the development of the Internet, said Beacher Wiggins, the director of acquisitions and bibliographic access at the Library of Congress.

Henriette Regina Davidson was born in Manhattan on October 1919. She began premedical studies at Hunter College, and in 1941 married Herbert Mois

Avram (pronounced AH-vrum). In the early 1950s, after her husband took a job with the National Security Agency, she moved to the Washington area, studying mathematics at George Washington University. In 1952, she too joined NSA, where she learned computer programming; she later worked for Datatrol, an early software company. In 1965, she joined the Library of Congress, where she was put in charge of the MARC pilot project.

It was not a job for the faint-hearted. The catalogue comprised millions of items – books, maps, films, sound recordings and more – in hundreds of languages, many using non-Roman alphabets. The cards for each item contained many discrete pieces of information (including author, title, publisher and place of publication), each of which needed to be represented by a separate mathematical algorithm. The pilot project was finished in 1968 and from 1969, bibliographic records on magnetic tape were dispatched to libraries around the country.

Henriette Avram retired from the Library of Congress in 1992 after 26 years of service. She had been LC's first director for processing systems, networks, and automation planning in 1980, became assistant librarian for processing service in 1983 and associate librarian for collection services in 1989.

She received numerous honours, including the American Library Association's 1971 Margaret Mann Citation in Cataloging and Classification, the 1988 Joseph W Lippincott Award, and the 1990 John Humphry/Forest Press Award. She also was named an honorary fellow in 1987 by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and was awarded Honorary Life Membership in the ALA at the Association's 1997 Annual Conference.

Adapted from the *San Francisco Chronicle* article by Margalit Fox, 4 May 2006, <http://www.sfgate.com/> and the American Libraries Association 'ALA Online', April 2006, <http://www.ala.org/ala/alonline/currentnews/newsarchive/2006abc/april2006ab/avram.htm>.



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